

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

SUPPORTING THE MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH OF BLACK STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS

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PANEL

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BUSETTE: Good afternoon, everybody and welcome to our webinar here on supporting the emotional and mental health of Black students in schools. I'm Camille Busette. I'm the vice president of Governance Studies here at Brookings and I'm thrilled to be able to welcome you to a really exciting conversation.

I will start off by giving a little bit of an introduction to this panel, which is to say that we are here at the Race Prosperity and Inclusion Initiative at Brookings engaged in a project, which is called Wellness in Black Life. And what that project is, is we are going into communities and learning from them what it means to experience wellness and what their definition of well-being is. We are primarily interested for this part of the project in Black boys and Black men, and we've been hearing a lot about what it means to support Black boys and Black men. And today we are going to be talking about supporting Black students in schools and what we've learned from this part of the project. Joining me are two of our partners in Little Rock, Arkansas, where we're doing some of this work. Kristin Koenigsfest is the executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Arkansas and Scott Hamilton is the CEO of the Urban League of the State of Arkansas. In addition, we are thrilled to be able to welcome my colleague, Rachel Perera, who's a fellow in the Brown Center for Education here in the Governance Studies program at Brookings.

And so we want to be able to hear from our panelists not only what we're learning in these conversations, particularly with our partners in Arkansas, but also we want to be able to position everything we're learning in kind of a broader context. And so I'm going to start off by asking both Kristin and Scott, you know, as we've been going through this project and you've been fantastic in convening multiple conversations about wellness for Black men and Black boys. What are some of the themes, the most prominent themes that have emerged from the discussion from community members as we've been going through this? And so, Scott, I'm going to start with you.

HAMILTON: Yeah, I appreciate it. We really learned a lot through the process and we're absolutely honored to participate in this program. You know, the themes that we saw a lot as it relates to young Black boys and men in our community, in particular, as we talked, is really a desire to be recognized, a desire to be included in our society in a manner that accepts them as they are, right? That there's things that are of kind of natural nature that are important, and they want to make sure that those things are valued. And so we learned sometimes that that was not always the case. There was a sense of having to adjust or sometimes justify who they felt like they are.

BUSETTE: Great. Thank you very much for that. Kristin, I'm going to turn to you and maybe some of the insights, early insights we've gained here.

KOENIGSFEST: Okay. We learned a lot about what the men that we talked to thought would be resources that are needed for the well-being of Black boys and men, and those included safety, access to financial literacy, mental health supports, quality after-school and summer learning programs, and also just mentors, which I love because we're with Big Brothers, Big Sisters, but how they just emphasize how important having supportive role models in their lives that look like them really is.

BUSETTE: Great. Thank you very much for that. I'm sure we're going to expand on that as we go through the webinar, but that's a fantastic jumping off point for me to ask Rachel. You know, Rachel, you spend, you know, your entire professional day thinking about students in schools, and I'm wondering if what you are hearing here resonates with some of the work that you've been doing.

PERERA: Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for having me. We know sort of nationally, there's been a lot of talk in the educator and education policy communities about a youth mental health crisis, one that was many years in the making, but has been exacerbated by the pandemic in many ways. And we are seeing, you know, lots of evidence that schools were not really well-equipped to deal with that mental health crisis. There's a huge shortage of school counselors and

school social workers. Many districts are now facing big budget cuts as the pandemic relief aid has run out over the last year. And we're also seeing, you know, evidence that kids are becoming, especially Black and Latino kids and kids from low-income communities are becoming less connected to schools. We're seeing evidence of increasing rates of chronic absenteeism. Kids are absent from school far more often.

But amidst, you know, I think what a really significant challenge facing our public education system, we're also seeing some positive trends. We're seeing interventions that are working, you know, things like social and emotional learning, which can help improve mental health literacy in the school. Things like improving the diversity of the teacher pipeline, which as Kristin mentioned, there's an abundance of evidence that as kids are exposed to teachers of the same race and ethnic background, they experience a host of positive benefits, especially for young Black boys. And there has been a big effort at the federal and state level over the last several years to put resources towards improving the diversity of the teacher pipeline. And the last thing I'll mention is that, you know, we also know that efforts to improve students' connectedness to school, which is something I heard from Scott and Kristin, can go a long way in terms of addressing their mental health and helping them build relationships with both adults in the building and other students.

BUSETTE: That's great. Thanks, Rachel. Scott and Kristin, I'm going to, want to pull out a little bit more around what we're hearing around about mental health in particular. What sort of insights did we get from our community members on the mental health of young people and how to support that? Kristin, I'm going to start with you and then go over to Scott.

KOENIGSFEST: Well, a lot about stigmas related to mental health and how a lot of times it's not talked about. There are not enough resources in our state, especially in rural communities, but just access to Black therapists is lacking. I think that those were, you know, the majority and people don't necessarily know where to go to access mental health supports. You know, there are organizations in our community that are doing work around this, but it's just a matter of communicating that with our families.

BUSETTE: Great. Thank you very much. And so Scott, what else did we hear from our Urban League conversations around mental health and support for students there?

HAMILTON: Yeah, there's definitely a need for more and access to ability to find those opportunities for mental health support. As Kristin said, you know, a lot of times just trying to find a comfort space. It's a topic that many Black families have not embraced, if you will. And I think a lot of that stigma still exists. We heard that just finding a safe space, a comfortable space in which, you know, young Black boys and men can really begin to get in touch first with some of the things by themselves, right. And then finding a place where they may engage in conversation, because what we found actually in some of our sessions, some opening-up conversations did take place. And I think there was a huge sense of comfort for some that expressed that, you know, hey, I've never said this, right. And I think that it's incredibly important what we heard to start to develop more of those avenues, those pathways. I think that will help, really begin to help young folks deal with society.

BUSETTE: So I think that's a great point, Scott. And Kristin, I'm just going to bounce it back to you for a second to ask you about this, this notion about safe spaces and what you might have heard with our Big Brothers, Big Sisters community members.

KOENIGSFEST: Well, we definitely heard that there is a need for more safe spaces, that that's not something that is necessarily readily available in schools. Some safe spaces were discussed and they talked about gyms and barbershops. They talked about churches, but it was really limited on where they felt they currently have a safe space to go and to discuss and to be vulnerable. So definitely more of, you know, there are spaces, but there's also a big lack of those types of environments.

BUSETTE: So, Scott, did you want to add something?

HAMILTON: No, no, but I agree 100 percent because we did. You know, the spaces that we heard shared is exactly what Kristin said. You know, the barbershops, I mean, there's some fantastic barbershop programs that have done well, churches as well. And those are great, but that's not enough. And because, you know, all young folks don't necessarily have that access to those those facilities.

BUSETTE: Yeah, I wanted to ask you something else about the sessions. So both, for both of you, we had we had a mixture of, you know, young people and people who are pretty far along in their careers in in those sessions. Did you, as we were going through the sessions, did you get a sense that the participants, particularly the more mature participants, were reflecting on their own experiences and drawing upon that? What did we find out there? Scott, I'm going to let you go first.

HAMILTON: Yeah, no, I believe you're exactly right. I think sometimes we heard kind of a third person, but deep down, I think that was that first person that was articulating things that have been of current and our past concerns. I think that it worked well having that group. We created what we believe was a safe space. And so those conversations, I believe, were excellent because we were able to get some things out in the open space on the table, as one would say, and start to delve into it. And what was nice about that is that once sometimes a topic was placed on the table, others chimed in, others began to talk. And I think the the the conversation of what's needed actually was what was needed.

BUSETTE: That's great. And also, just really quick, Scott, before we get to Kristin, you know, it did seem that people were, a lot of the participants talked about how hard it is for boys, Black boys to be Black boys and to feel vulnerable and to have spaces to be vulnerable. Do you want to comment on that?

HAMILTON: Yeah, so, you know, we live in a society that is quite frankly sometimes tough on a young Black boy in terms of imagery, images, success stories, things that are readily available that would be, you know, always encouraging for our young Black boys. And I think that is part of the struggle. We also live in a society sometimes that is not as kind to a young Black boy in terms of public spaces, schools, what have you. And I think all of these things that we as a society have to be aware of, because that is certainly an impact. And I think we heard those things, these are things that sometimes impact a young person's confidence that are desire to explore and expand and do the things that, you know, a young person should do to be able to become comfortable and figure out, you know, who they are. We're all individually wired, individually made, and we have things that we want to do. We have to create an environment, though, where our young people can do just that because otherwise people cannot be, you know, meet their full potential. So I think that's a big thing that we certainly are aware of as the organization that we operate in. The work that we did, I think, confirmed that. And it was interesting to see, you know, the difference between the younger participants and the older participants. Because what I think we saw in some cases is that if certain things are not addressed and dealt with, they continue on, you know, as you age, as you get older. These are things that impact, I think, some adults in terms of how they operate with society as adults. So incredibly important topic.

BUSETTE: Thank you very much, Scott. So, Kristin, what else did we hear about vulnerability, about, you know, the ability for Black boys to be boys? And generally about, you know, how the interaction between younger and older folks in those sessions went.

KOENIGSFEST: So, we heard a lot. We had every generation from individuals in their 20s up to their 70s that were part of our conversations. And so, but a lot of, you know, they did talk about stereotypes of Black boys and just really kind of what Scott was talking about, just how, what they're supposed to be interested in, what they're supposed to be doing as careers, you know, like emphasis on sports over academics, for example. And that that's, you know, being, not being vulnerable, not showing emotion as just really kind of what they grew up with and what they still

see. And a lot of our men talked mostly about the youth, even though it was questions about Black boys and men, but really, they were talking about that because they say that the issues that the men have in life as men stem from issues that they're having in their youth. And that need to be addressed, you know, and they, you know, the the adage of it's easier to build strong boys or men than to repair broken men. And so really all of their focus was on what can we do now? What do the boys need now? What kind of support so that we can make sure that they have a positive future and a good well-being when they become adults?

BUSETTE: Yeah, thank you for that. And so I'm going to stick with you for a second and just ask you, so what kind of what kinds of things can be done? What were some of the solutions and proposals that our community members had to support the well-being of young Black men, young Black boys?

KOENIGSFEST: Well, really, some -- excuse me -- some of the proposals were having more conversations like this. Keep the conversations going so that they can learn more about resources that exist. And with that, families need to be able to know about what is happening in the community. Because, like I said earlier, there are a lot of community organizations that are doing good work here in Arkansas, but not everybody knows about them. So some sort of central repository where that where individuals can go and they can find out about different organizations and services, more organizations working together to partner -- excuse me -- to essentially wrap them with services as well. More role models, more mentors, more mental health in schools and after schools. So those are kind of the more the things that really stood out on our end.

BUSETTE: Thank you. And Scott, what were some of the proposals that we heard?

HAMILTON: Yeah, and Kristin, I think hit the nail on the head. You know, there was there's nothing magic that we heard. I mean, there was nothing unique that says, hey, we have to have a very structured, special, unique, never-done-before type strategy. This is simple stuff. It's the things that everybody that lives and has objectives of a quality of life, high quality of life. It's the same thing. And I think about more what we heard, though, was accessibility, you know, programs that exist, making sure that kids can get to and from programs, Boys and Girls Club, Big Brothers, Big Sisters. You know, if it's a church program, if it's an after-school program, if it's something, if it's a youth program, getting to and from the library. I remember every Saturday morning, I mentioned this to you, my mom took me and my two sisters to the library and it was like, we're here for an hour, they have books and that was it. Figure it out. But the thing is, is we had a car and so that was not an issue for us. And so it was transportation.

I think that we have to sometimes back off and demystify that we've got to find something really unique. You know, there's something missing in our society. It's not. It's really just engagement. It's as simple as that. If you live on a block and there's a family on your block and they've got two little kids and you don't know their names. Just knock on the door. You know, take some doughnuts or the hamburger, a hot dog. Simply knock on the door. Hey, Ms. So -and -so, I'm Scott. I'd like to meet you. I live on the house down the street. Yeah, I know. We've been living next to each other for 10 years. I'm sorry I haven't come before. It's never too early. It's never too late. Go introduce yourself. Hey, I see you got two little young men. Hey, what's your names? You know, what do they like to do? She might say, gosh, if I simply had somebody that could pick them up and take them to this program, then that would be great for them. Volunteer to do it. These are simple things. Look around at your church, at the schools. You don't have to have kids. I don't have kids. Go volunteer to school, right? Just show up. Say, what can I do to help? I think those are the type of things that as a community we have to do more of that we have to take ownership of. Again, this stuff is not rocket science. These kids are not scary. Sometimes people say, hey, I don't know what to say to a kid. Same thing people say to you. Hey, how you doing? What's your name? What's your favorite food? What do you like to do? What's your favorite subject? Who's your favorite athlete? This isn't hard. If it is hard, go to the phone. Ask ChatGBT. It will tell you how to talk to a kid. Simply take the first step. That's it. And I think that's what we have to do as a society is get people comfortable in this. And in doing so, the the the amazement I think that you would

see in a young kid's face and say, wow, you thought of me. That's the start. That's what we learned. That's what we heard. We did not hear again that you have to have some kryptonite or platinum or anything. Just go out there and do it.

BUSETTE: I love that. And I know we we we also heard a lot about consistency. And I think one of the things that came up in your sessions was, you know, people really want to participate in the mainstream economy, but participating in the mainstream economy when you're, you know, it's hard to get to places. And as a kid, you know, you rely so much on adults and you really do need to get to places and they need things to do. We heard a lot about consistency, consistency of programming. But you can you chat a little bit about that?

HAMILTON: Yeah, you know, that's the same thing. Consistency is so key. I mean, you know, young people, once, you know, they they they're looking for something. And unfortunately, that's why we see kids get into trouble, because one thing that's consistent in our society is trouble. And so if we don't offer them something different, then that's where they're going to go. You can't blame them, right. You know, adults would talk to your legislators, talk to your bus system. We're in a position where that we have to advocate for our kids, for our young folks. They can't advocate for themselves. Right. When was the last time you saw a 10-year-old go to the Capitol and say, hey, I'm going to talk to my legislator today. Kristin, you know, you guys are, I think, who is it that's going to D.C. while you're there, make sure -- well, I mean, it's on your agenda -- but at the end of the day, that's the point, is impress upon that. Sometimes we miss that, how important it is when we are in our society and our community and we're in an Uber. In fact, I was somewhere I think I was in Chicago and asked somebody, you know, Uber and they had some kind of kids program. They're like, oh, yeah, every morning I pick up the next number of kids, take them to school. I remember I lived in Detroit and there were some issues that were going on. And the taxi cab drivers all came together. They're picking kids up. And it was on snow days, that's what it was.

And so I think the consistency is so important. You know, I really implore that we're asking folks to be involved, but make sure you got the time to do it. You know, well, don't don't be in a space where you start and you can't complete. We're all busy. Be realistic. Don't overburden. Find little things to do until you can really work up because that consistency is important. And it's one of the things that we heard from our kids that participated is that, you know, sometimes programs would start up or what have you. They'd be involved and then it would stop. Now, there's various reasons why it stopped. A lot of things that we found out was transportation. Is that programs would start up, someone would have a way to get to and from that program and then whatever change there, they couldn't go anymore. That's a heartbreaker. So as consistency is, is that get as many people involved. Teamwork with kids, because if you can't do it every day, maybe if there's three of you that's working with something that's working with the organization, that's that consistency. And consistency is incredibly important because it says to that kid, I'm valued.

BUSETTE: Thank you for that, Kristin, you want to add anything to that?

KOENIGSFEST: Well, I 100 percent agree with that piece of consistency with supportive adults in a child's life, because I mean, with Big Brothers, Big Sisters, that is our key piece. We say you don't have to be perfect, you just have to be present. And so there's just been so, unfortunately, a lot of families that we work with and kids in our community have not had consistency in their life. And so it really is important. That's how you build trust. That's how you help a young person to understand their strengths and help them move towards accomplishing their goals. And, you know, a big part of some of the barriers that come up with consistency is funding, because, like Scott said, you know, transportation is very, very important. So many of the kids that we see in different programs, they wouldn't have those opportunities to engage in the programs unless if they did not have transportation. And so that really is a key component to allow them to be a part of something that can really help them to be successful in life, like an after school program or another opportunity. But, yeah, just really, I think, being sure that you have time to be there and that you make an effort to be there for a young person, because they're counting on you.

BUSETTE: Yeah, thanks very much for that. I also just wanted to ask a little bit about what we heard around mental health resources and schools. Did we hear anything or outside of school? Did we hear anything specific to that? Any proposals? Scott?

HAMILTON: Okay, sure. Yeah, you know, we definitely delved into it. We, I'm gonna say what we heard is that there's not enough. You know, there's the, I'm trying to remember Lorenzo Lewis's project. It's the barbershop project or something like that. It started right here in Little Rock, Arkansas. I understand it's international at this point and very, very simple, right? You know, kids go, most people go to a barber sitting there in a chair. And the project, the program was designed to get barbers to ask them just some initial, very simple, basic questions, right? Just kind of the conversation starter. And the idea being is that, you know, if a young person opened up and say, hey, yeah, these things are going on, the thing was that barber now had a pathway to transfer information. If they heard something from a young person, that program wasn't trying to teach the barber how to be a professional mental health practitioner, but enough to say, hey, you know, might want to kind of direct this person there. I think that's what we heard of is really creating more pathways and accessibility. And I think that's incredibly important. I think we've got to do that. And we didn't get an answer.

BUSETTE: Great, thank you. Kristin.

KOENIGSFEST: We heard the same thing, just really more around the lack thereof of mental health resources in schools. I do know that our schools have increased their capacity to have some mental health resources because they have social workers in schools and they have wellness offices and things of that nature. I think it might be a matter of if everybody knows about those, again. And, you know, what Scott was talking about with the barbershop project, I think it's called the Confess Project and it definitely has expanded. And that came from just this lack of having access to resources and to have a space where men can talk about difficulties that they may be having.

BUSETTE: Thanks very much, Kristin. So Rachel, based on what you're hearing here, any thoughts about how this resonates with other sort of findings or what we know more generally?

PERERA: Yeah, there's a lot here. I was trying to figure out what to jump on. I want to really emphasize a point both Kristin and Scott were making around consistency. And I want to emphasize this point with policymakers and our philanthropic funders because I think we see in education that programs have these short shelf lives. And we are constantly facing whiplash in terms of what the priorities are, what's the trend of the day, what are folks interested in. And I think it creates really difficult conditions to do the work that, like Scott was mentioning, is sort of foundational and is not like interesting, new or novel, but is tough work, is work that requires funding and resources and an eye towards the sort of long term, right? Like we might not see returns on this a year in, but these are important sort of fundamental elements of schooling that I think we for a long time have deprioritized in light of pursuing other sort of more novel initiatives.

And a couple other ideas that stuck out to me. Another something that we've been talking a lot about in education research for the last 15 years or so is community schools. And this sounds like something that would really address the needs of the communities that Kristin and Scott are working in, where community schools have this very explicit charge of serving as a community hub, connecting families and students to different resources, educational and non-educational, including mental health resources, a dentist, your doctor. Again, like really making sure that families in the community are well aware of everything that they have access to, including government benefits and things like that. You know, kids spend most of their days during the school year at school. And so schools provide a very acute opportunity and a very clear opportunity to provide that information to families and students.

And then the last thing I'll say, you know, similar to what both Scott and Kristin were mentioning with this barbershop program, there's, I think, an emphasis -- programs that have

shown success are ones that try to train all school staff in some basic literacy around mental health supports. Because again, like, you know, kids might open up in ways you don't expect or at times you don't expect. And having all adults in the building that are engaging with students have some basic literacy and some awareness of the resources so they can connect students to resources that exist can also go a long way to, you know, making sure students are getting access to early intervention services, making sure that students are getting access to mental health services and improving the sense of improving their sense of connectedness to school and to adults in the building. I think there are other initiatives in the education space that show a lot of promise and sound similar to things that Kristin and Scott are mentioning.

And then I'll mention one last thing, which I think I said one last thing before, but something else that I think I've thought a lot about over the last few years is improving discipline practices in schools. We have seen for a long time that student codes of conduct, school discipline practices are expecting more from kids than they can do as kids. We need to have space for kids to make mistakes, for kids to misbehave and not have like overly punitive practices that can inhibit their ability to build connections with the school, to build connections with adults in the building and to, you know, have trust in these institutions. And so I think discipline is another area where I think we are failing lots of kids and is another area if we're thinking about improving mental health that we should be paying attention to.

BUSETTE: Thanks for that very important point. I know there's been a lot of discussion about that and certainly, and you could, you know, speak to this, but a lot of evidence shows that Black and Latino boys in particular tend to be disproportionately disciplined, particularly at critical times, in adolescence, usually 6th through 11th grade, when they are forming their identities, exploring their options and aspirations and also learning how to connect with people in a really kind of durable way. I don't know if you wanted to comment on that.

PERERA: Yeah, I mean, that's true. We've known that for a long time, that has been true for a long time. And we know from really high-quality research that when kids perceive discipline as unfair, they lose trust in the adults in the building, they lose trust in the institution. And it has this like negative downward, this, it can have a very big negative impact down the line in the short and long term in terms of their academic outcomes, non-academic outcomes, how they interact with the criminal justice system. And so I think we, we just need to be paying attention to these practices and these issues much more and really address the sort of like core issues which are that, I think, our discipline practices are divorced from what we know about child development, what we know about mental health. They are sort of grounded in these old ideas of, you know, you threaten kids with a harsh sanction and they will sit still in class and like, I don't know if you've ever hung out with a six-year-old, like the threat of staying home isn't really compelling to sit still, and like, there might be something else going on. And so we really have to pay attention and like, be talking more about these practices from the perspective of like, improving student well-being, improving their experiences in school, which we know matters for all of the outcomes that have huge consequences for their adult outcomes.

BUSETTE: Great, thanks for that, Rachel. Scott and Kristin, I want to kind of go back to you. Based on what participants shared, what to you looks like the ideal supportive environment for Black boys both in and out of school? So Scott, I'm going to start with you.

HAMILTON: Yes, it's one that it's fueled with love. There has to be a base fundamental objective of anybody that's involved that is loving that person as a human. You've got to have that, because anybody can see through things that are not legitimate. So I think as a society, we have to work on that, because we have a society that sometimes say that certain people are tough to love. I'm just being very honest and we heard that. And so I think that we have to make sure people and parents and adults and teachers and mentors really deep down. Now, what does that mean? That means you've got to be inside yourself, dealing with whatever things that you may have personally, when I'm talking to you, I'm saying in general, whatever biases that are there, you've got to

address them. You've got to deal with them because we all have them. I know I have them. And so I think that is the start.

Now, as that's being worked through, I think that has to be the driver and motivator to say, what is it that we're trying to do? There has to be the basis that the efforts to work the things that we're doing with that demographic are legitimately for them. It cannot be something that there's a reward for me or there's something that makes me look good in society. It has to be about that young person. I'm doing this work because I need to make sure that they are successful in this world. It's a tough one. And so I think as programs are put in place, and the programs that I operate with, we spend time in that space. We have those conversations, because the engagement with that individual is going to be genuine. It's going to be the one that they can feel the, they can feel the love. They can feel the respect. They can feel the, the ability to be vulnerable. And as you know, we've talked about the conversation in terms of vulnerability was huge. And I understand it because if young people are in places where particularly they're around adults and they feel like that adult maybe is not really genuinely caring, then they're going to be reserved. You know, that's a natural human tendency is to try to protect yourself and trying to protect your emotional side. I mean, the most pain is emotional. It's not physical. More, more pain and damage can be done from an emotional standpoint than physical. And I think that we have to be very, very careful as we get involved with programs as we build programs as we put things together that we're really thinking about that. And we I think we also know have to know that some some of our young folks will be coming to us injured. They're already injured. It's too late to avoid injury. And so how do we manage it? How do we make sure that when those injured individuals come and they operate and they engage that sometimes things that we may hear or see take the step back to say, OK, I may be dealing with someone that's not at the, that I may be dealing with the, as they say the the the -- you know what story I'm looking for? I think, you know, talking about it's the the made-up person, right? The spokesperson, let's call it that. I may not be at the individual level yet. I may be dealing with the spokesperson, so I got to work through this spokesperson to get to the individual. We've got to know that. So, you know, when we work with our young folks, it's a lot of work. It's a lot of soul searching. It's a lot of time. It's a lot of thinking. It's a lot of patience. When you break through, I'm going to tell you, it's amazing because I've seen it happen, not as often as I would like personally, but when that kid finally opens up, you're just like, oh my God, what do I do now? Because that rush of emotions, that rush of reach out, that rush of of of it's just straight up love. Well, it really that's what these kids are looking for. And so we've got to figure that out. We've got to make sure that we can we can help and open those doors. Sorry for being verbose, but that's a personal spot for me.

BUSETTE: No, no, I really appreciate that. And I appreciate your passion around this. Kristin, so what did you hear based on on what participants shared? What do you think is kind of the ideal of support environment for Black boys both in and out of school and in school?

KOENIGSFEST: I definitely think having well-qualified teachers is important across the board. And also I'll echo what Scott said about having individuals who understand where they're coming from and understand the impacts of trauma, the impacts of adverse childhood experiences that can have, individuals can have, just any kid in general. That they have some type of idea about, you know, there's a lot going on with a youth mental health first aid. Having that training, I think, is very important so that they know how to respond and engage with youth in the out of school environment. You know, I think it's again talking about having supportive adults in a child's life, because we know that the more supports you have in life and people that is going to lead you to a more successful pathway and better well-being in the after-school program. I think that everybody needs access to after-school programs. And there are a lot of things that would make it a high-quality after-school program. So opportunities to engage in the arts, opportunities to engage in activities that are related to self-expression and understanding one's strength, to hear from, you know, that's focused on career awareness and bringing in individuals who are in doing different careers and who look like the participants of the program. Programs that, in after-school programs, they can connect kids and families to service and that really go out of their way to engage the family. So it's a holistic approach. So it's not just about the youth, but engaging that family to see if

there are other supports that that family may need that, you know, or maybe like root issues that need to be first addressed so that the boys can have a full sense of well being.

BUSETTE: Yeah, thank you very much for that. Rachel, any any thoughts based on what you're hearing here?

PERERA: Yeah, I just echo a lot of what both Kristin and Scott have said, you know, when Scott was talking about needing love and care, like I think about that a lot with teachers, and I don't think we talk about that enough. But I think one of the first qualifications for teachers needs to be like, do you like hanging out with kids? Like, do you have the capacity to like care and like build strong relationships with kids? Right? Like, this is an important aspect of whether you are able to be successful in these, I think, more less tangible ways. And I think, you know, improving the diversity of the teacher pipeline, which I mentioned before, has been a big emphasis in the education, has been a big emphasis of policymaking at the federal and state level over the last few years. And I think we just have to continue to invest in that to the points that Scott and Kristin raised around like kids needing to see to have role models, kids needing to have some point of connection from their home lives to the adults in the school building. And I think the more we can try to bring people from the community into schools, the better equipped schools will be to, you know, improve kids' well-being, improve their sense of connectedness to schools and adults. And so I really just emphasize these two points.

And I think the last thing I'd say is, you know, I think we really, this is a sort of broader problem that we're wrestling with in education is around teacher shortages and teacher burnout. I think all of those problems really undermine efforts to improve relationships with students and to deal with students who are dealing with and to like work with students effectively who are dealing with their own stuff. And so, you know, thinking about strengthening the teacher pipeline more broadly and figuring out ways to make teachers' jobs more sustainable so they have the time and space to do this more, you know, relationship-driven work with students in the day.

BUSETTE: Oh, that's great. You know, Kristin had also mentioned schools working more closely with families. And I know there are a number of models out there, I think Promise Schools, etc., which have that as their kind of core concept and philosophy. Anything that we know from that kind of approach?

PERERA: Yeah, we know that like relational trust with families is really important to effective engagement with parents and caregivers. And that type of work takes time and it takes, you know, addressing barriers and misconceptions and frankly, you know, past trauma that families may have experienced or caregivers may have experienced with the school system. And or other instances that things that have led to them being mistrustful of those institutions. And so I think improving relational trust can go a long way to improve family engagement. And we know that, you know, strong family community, strong family community school partnerships, like when we're all working together, has huge benefits for students in their short and long term. Educational outcomes, how well they're doing in school, the ability to address, you know, acute issues as they come up, whether they're mental health or physical health. And so I think, you know, emphasizing both the relationship aspect between teachers and students, but also teachers and families and caregivers and all of the adults in the building and the broader community, I think, can go a long way to addressing some of these big issues that we're talking about.

BUSETTE: Right. Thank you very much. So before we go into Q&A from the audience, we will, I wanted to just kind of wrap up with one question here. So, Kristin and Scott, as you're reflecting on the conversations that we've been holding in Little Rock, have the conversations about well-being brought additional benefits to the participants? Scott, you want to go first?

HAMILTON: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. In fact, our participants have asked and we've continued some conversations just kind of random. In fact, we're going to formalize them. Our participants are like, no, we can't end it. So I think it certainly has opened up the willingness and

the, I think, the benefit of. So, absolutely, I think that's the case. Also, too, one of the things I do want to point out, you know, a lot of times when we talk about, you know, Black kids and in particular Black boys, you know, we spend quite a bit of time with those that, you know, we want to, you know, bring more support to and love and things like that. But let's not get it wrong. There's some young Black kids that are knocking it out of the park. I've got some friends that if I could come back as a child, I'd want to be their child because we see consistently parents across the board, single moms, single dads, two-parent households, whatever, that are knocking it out of the park. And we're seeing kids that are extremely successful. They're confident. They're engaged in everything from art to technology. So, this is not an all encompasses, this is not a one size fits all. You know, we're talking specifically about those that we see that need that more embracement, but those kids that that are really thriving in our society, they're out there. And the more that we can find ways to get those kids connected across the board. That's the winning strategy. So, yeah, no, we've had just a wonderful time continuing this type conversation.

BUSETTE: Love that. Thank you, Scott. Kristin?

KOENIGSFEST: I'd say the same. Our participants definitely express that they would love to keep these conversations going. I think that they, they met people that they did not know, they learned about resources that they did not know themselves existed in our community. They practice their vulnerability, like we talked about earlier, where they were opening up in ways that they had not previously done. So, overall, I think just being a part of the few sessions that we were able to do, they were they they learned a lot about themselves through the process, too. And again, now they know more about resources that we have in our community.

BUSETTE: That's great. Thank you very much. And we have really enjoyed working with you and are really looking forward to continuing the partnership. We're going to go into audience Q and A. At this point, we've got a number of questions that were submitted from people who registered for this webinar before before the webinar started. So I'm going to start with those. So this is this is a question about the role and the impact of connectedness in supporting the mental and emotional health of Black students. We've talked a lot about mental health resources. We've talked a lot about mentors. We've talked about having access to after-school programs. This is much more around social connections. This question, so what do we hear about social connections and how social connections are linked to wellness and well-being? And either of you can go first, but, so, up to you.

HAMILTON: Well, yeah, no, we certainly talk about social connections. Again, that's that's that that whole being engaged. I mean, all humans need some kind of connectivity. I mean, I got a few friends that probably don't thrive on much connectivity. But, you know, that being involved, being in the being in the present, you know, what's going on? Young folks want to be there. They don't want to be an outcast where you see society doing this and you're over here and you can't engage. And there are a lot of reasons why sometimes our folks can't engage. And those are the things that we have to watch out for, because those social connections are the ones that we all really kind of develop our own personal comfort and skill set and things like that. Because, you know, that's how you're kind of rated. You know, if this is what everybody's doing, if everybody's snow skiing, well, put your snow skis on. Can you get down that hill? Can you do a bunny trail? Can you do a black diamond? Which one are you on? So that's what humans do. And I think that we have to make sure that all people have the ability to engage in how we operate as humans.

BUSETTE: Thank you for that. Kristin, did you want to add anything?

KOENIGSFEST: Well, yeah, and I think, you know, they talked about it in terms of having supportive adults in a youth's life, their own connections to family and friends and how that plays a part in their own well-being. And, you know, connecting the dots to also social connections can not only support mental health and just being able to feel like you're not alone in struggles, but it also leads to opportunities, which then lead them into a point where they learn about different careers that exist, where, you know, because financial stability was also one of the components of well-

being that was discussed. And so having those social connections equals more opportunities to just see what's out there, see what's possible, understand their strengths as young people, what they're good at.

BUSETTE: That makes sense. That's great. Thank you. Rachel, we've gotten some questions around what are school districts doing to change their focus, either in classroom conditions, approach to students, after-school support, to meet the psychological needs of their students. What are we hearing? What do we know is happening there?

PERERA: Yeah, there's a lot there that schools are doing, but I think, by and large, schools need more resources to do these things better and at scale. So one thing, you know, when I hear you all talk about sort of social connectedness, we know from sort of big national studies that kids are spending more time on their phones and less time hanging out with friends in person than ever before. And that contributes to less sense of connectedness, lower quality of relationships and worse mental health outcomes. And so a lot of there's been a huge movement to ban cell phones in schools, which personally, based on the research, I think is a good idea.

Schools are also doing a lot to try to expand after-school programs and address the school counselor and mental health crisis. There has been, there's been huge shortages and I think, you know, they're doing a lot to try to bring in more staff into school, but there are also like short, those pipelines are weak. And so we need, you know, I think policymakers and folks at the state level need to be thinking more about how to get more people on the path towards those types of careers. And so those are the types of things that schools are trying to do. But I think by and large, there's still a lot of struggles, especially now as pandemic relief aid has run out. And many schools in lots of parts of the countries are facing enrollment declines. And so we have these big budget shortfalls that schools are facing and schools are going to be in a position where they're going to have to cut sort of non-essential services. And sadly, these, you know, in lots of states, these types of programs are, you know, quote unquote, not essential, although I'd argue they are. And so I think we really, you know, to, I think it was Scott's point, like, people need to be aware of this. And this is something we should be sort of talking about and talking to our legislators about at the state level, most and at the local level. Most school funding comes from your state and from your local district. And so you need to be paying attention to those two sort of bodies because that's where the money's flowing and schools need more resource to do this. This is not something that you can do without the money.

BUSETTE: Yeah, thanks for that, Rachel. We also have questions about after-school programs. And I know that both of your organizations run basically extracurricular programs for young people. What would you say, just based on, you know, the sort of deep experience you have there is kind of the secret sauce to supporting the well-being of the young folks that you interact with, that your organization interacts with. Kristin, I'm going to let you go first.

KOENIGSFEST: So I think it's the things we've talked about before, the consistency with staff and with availability of programming and transportation to get young folks there. I think that having staff that have been well-trained in some ways to understand, you know, the things the young people go through, trauma, social-emotional learning, how to work with, you know, cultural competency, things of that nature. And then pulling in opportunities for the kids, whether it be field trips, other, you know, cultural activities that they can participate in. Again, I'll say career awareness, job shadowing, giving them artistic expression and the ability to engage in the arts. I think that those, in my experience, I've seen worked in youth development for at least 15 years and just seeing that those are the most successful types of programs and they have the biggest outcomes, positive outcomes and impacts on kids and their families.

BUSETTE: Great. Thank you, Scott.

HAMILTON: Yeah, everything she said. But no, in addition to that, though, it's fluidity. It's flexibility. It's creating programs that are flexible enough to allow those kids to kind of develop the

program, not coming in with a lot of rigid focus. So, you know, you've got your structure around it, but then letting kids be kids, and beginning to say, okay, here's where they're operating. And so an ability to meet them where they are. I know we say that a lot, but that's very true, because that is what opens those kids up more to say, okay, let me keep exploring. You got to ride with them. But Kristin laid out all of the specific things that you have to have to get to that point.

BUSETTE: Yeah, I wanted to come back to you, Kristin, on this. But Scott, you guys run a drone program. You want to describe what that is?

HAMILTON: Tell me about flexibility and not knowing where that was going to go. So, yeah, what we did, we had an opportunity with the city of Little Rock, the city had a program where they wanted to have youth violence reduction. That was the grant. And so, you know, you kind of read this and say, okay, well, there's a whole lot of stuff we could do. And I don't even remember how we were talking about drones. And we knew this young man that was teaching kids how to fly drones. We were like, that'd be cool. And so we put this thing together. We said, look, if kids outside in the field flying a drone, they're probably not doing anything bad. And that's what we came up with. So we came up with a three-day program in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club and several other organizations. And it's one day, the kids come in, they're literally in a classroom. We're teaching them how to write code on a computer. The code then teaches the drone what it's going to do. So they're actually writing the code for the drone. And so the second day, they're in a classroom and we're talking about, you know, life skills, doing this, that and others. That's kind of like, okay, you got to sit here and listen to somebody tell you about being a good kid. And the third day, we let them loose. They're outside or they're in a gym and they're flying these drones. And let me tell you something, I've never seen anything like it. I mean, kids that have never touched a toy. Well, I call it a toy, these things are expensive. And at first, we saw most of them were a little scared. Oh, I don't want to break it. I don't want to break it. We said, break it. We got other ones. Next thing you know, these drones are flying. They're doing back flips, 360s, they're coming at you. They're laughing. They're having a ball. Again, and the whole idea was this was a very different way we thought of having to deal with, you know, reduction of use violence. Keep them busy. And those are the type of things that we tried to do. And that's what we've learned. And from that, it's moved into workforce development. These kids now are learning how these drones work. They're learning some aviation technology. Once they finish this program, they're really prepared to take an FAA certification license at 16. What does that mean? They can get a job at the airport. So a lot of times, just kind of getting engaged with something with not a lockstep plan in place, the kids will help you develop your program.

BUSETTE: That's great to hear. And Kristin, a little bit more. I mean, obviously you do use set of mentorships, but if you wanted to provide a little more texture to some of the programming that you provide would be great.

KOENIGSFEST: So, we partner with schools and out of school programs and just with families in the community. And that's, you know, we, the kids who want a mentor are able to sign up through our program. And then our work is in engaging the community and, I guess, educating them about the benefits of mentoring both for the mentee and the mentor, because there are a lot of benefits when you volunteer. A lot of our adults get a lot more out of it than maybe some of the kids and they learn a lot too. And it's really, you know, we support, we create those matches. We call them a mentor match. And we train the adults, we background check the adults, vet them, and we match them based on, you know, their past, their qualities, as well as the youth. They can go into the schools and meet with the kids. They can meet them in the community. But we also have a number of other partnerships that we're engaged in, which, like our partnership with the Brookings Institution, which gives us a really good insight into the needs of individuals in our community in this demographic. So that we can find out how we can better support them. We also partner with organizations that give youth in our program specific leadership opportunities. That really give them that voice and choice to create programming like Scott was talking about. So, essentially, that's really what we do with Big Brothers, Big Sisters. Connect to opportunities, supports, and then just support those kids, their families, and the mentors that are working with them.

BUSETTE: Well, thanks very much, Kristin. Scott, did you want to say something?

HAMILTON: Yeah, no, I was just nodding. I mean, everything Kristen is saying, it's so cool that, I mean, it's the same thing. And it's not, again, these are not rocket science things. They're just pretty straightforward.

BUSETTE: Yeah. Well, I want to thank you both, not only for joining us here and sharing your wisdom with everybody on the webinar, but also for continuing to be excellent partners to us and our Wellness in Black Life project. I want to thank Rachel for joining us and thank all of you who joined us on the webinar. And we look forward to chatting with you again about this very important topic. Thank you.